Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

[redacted]

25X1

3 April 1975
Copy #3

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Intelligence Coverage of the War in Vietnam
December 1974 - March 1975

SUMMARY

This paper concludes that (1) the community's estimates of North Vietnamese intentions were accurate; but (2) that intelligence publications did not foresee President Thieu's decision in mid-March to withdraw from major parts of the country; and (3) also did not warn of the impending collapse of major elements of the South Vietnamese armed forces. It also argues, however, that--since Thieu consulted no one in advance--his move was virtually unforeseeable and that it was the manner of his move, combined with certain vulnerabilities of the South Vietnamese armed forces, which precipitated that collapse.

25X1

[redacted]

Prepared by the Product Review Division of the Intelligence Community Staff

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

[redacted]

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

3 April 1975

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Intelligence Coverage of the War in Vietnam
December 1974 - March 1975

INTRODUCTION

In mid-March, President Thieu made a decision to abandon South Vietnam's central highlands and to withdraw the elite Airborne Division from Military Region 1. His intention was to concentrate his units in the southern half of the country and around the large population centers along the north-central coast.

The rationale underlying this decision was Thieu's apparent conclusion that his forces were over-extended and under-supplied and faced an enemy possessing a formidable inventory of armor and artillery and a large, combat-ready strategic reserve. And certainly Thieu's assessment also included his judgment that the future of US aid was uncertain at best.

President Thieu consulted no one while making his strategic decision--not the RVN's Joint General Staff, the regional commanders, or any US officials. Without the benefit of careful military planning, Thieu's actions have precipitated South Vietnam's worst defeat in the long history of this war. Saigon's armed forces and, indeed, the government itself, are now tottering on the brink of collapse.

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

These events raise some obvious questions

--Was there a failure on the part of the intelligence community to accurately forecast the course of events in South Vietnam? And, if so, what was the precise nature of the failure?

To answer these questions, two major specifics must be addressed: the Intelligence Community's estimates of Communist military intentions in South Vietnam, and its assessments of the capabilities of South Vietnam's armed forces. We take these in turn.

I. Communist Military Intentions in South Vietnam

The intelligence community's principal forecast of Communist intentions in South Vietnam through mid-1975 is contained in NIE 53/14.3-2-74: "Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam," published on 23 December 1974. The principal conclusions of this paper were these:

> "...the evidence points toward a marked increase in military action between now and mid-1975...." (p.1)

> "We expect at a minimum a sharp escalation in fighting this dry season with the Communists making greater use of their in-country firepower than in 1974. They clearly have the flexibility to commit a portion of their strategic reserve, and we believe that they are likely to base their decisions on how the fighting evolves during the dry season. We believe that they will make such a commitment to exploit major vulnerabilities in the South Vietnamese position or to maintain the

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

[redacted] 25X1

> momentum of their military effort. . . we estimate that an all-out offensive is unlikely this dry season, although there is a risk that Hanoi might move in this direction if it perceived an opportunity where it could score a decisive victory." (p. 9)

The course of events since the publication of this estimate (until Thieu's withdrawal scheme backfired) suggests that this estimate accurately forecast North Vietnamese intentions. The first three months of 1975 were characterized by an "escalation in fighting" and the North Vietnamese commitment of "a portion of their strategic reserve." And the North Vietnamese have obviously moved "to exploit major vulnerabilities in the South Vietnamese position." In other words, the character and intensity of the fighting, the posture and deployment of North Vietnam's divisions in RVN, and the limited commitment of the NVA's strategic reserve division all indicate that the NIE was accurate in its principal conclusions.

We believe that the actions of the NVA in the week after Thieu implemented his pull-back plan also support the NIE's judgments. Clearly confused, Hanoi initially was not quick to press its tremendous opportunity. And our best reading [redacted] 25X1

25X1 [redacted] indicates that the recent commitment of additional units to the fight in the South occurred after, not before, Thieu's decision.

25X1 Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

II. The Performance of the Armed Forces of South Vietnam

The question here--Did the intelligence community misassess the capabilities of the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces?--requires a complex answer. The December 1974 NIE characterized those armed forces in this manner:

> "The military performance of the RVNAF has been reasonably effective... /and it is/ capable of providing security sufficient to protect the bulk of the populace, despite ammunition, fuel, and equipment stringencies." (p. 5)

Clearly, this does not portend the events which unfolded in March and April 1975. However, in fleshing out the details, the NIE goes on to state:

> "Nevertheless, the quality of many RVNAF commanders is still marginal, especially at company and field grade levels." (p. 5)

> "The RVNAF is plagued by the perennial problems of reduced manning levels." (p. 5)

> "South Vietnamese military shortcomings are most apparent within the territorial forces... /many of them/ have performed poorly as a result of inadequate leadership discipline and unit manning." (p. 5)

> "The most unsettling development affecting the RVNAF, however, derives from the decline in US military aid available to the GVN." (p. 6)

> "Even at the 1974 level of combat, we would thus expect the RVNAF to be in a significantly weaker logistical position by the end of the dry season." (p. 6)

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

Taken together, these amplifications of the RVNAF's condition provide the reader of the NIE with the description of an armed force which has distinct problems--problems which are not getting better. The Estimate summarizes in this way:

> "RVNAF combat capabilities appear in retrospect to have peaked in the year or so following the cease fire. There has been some decline in RVNAF effectiveness, but the decline has not yet reached significant proportions." (p. 6)

And most prescient of all is this key judgment of the NIE:

> "As important as the current level of US assistance is the GVN's faith in a continuing US commitment to provide military assistance in the future when it is needed. A loss of confidence in the US commitment to South Vietnam would seriously affect the GVN's morale and will to continue the struggle regardless of the actual level of stocks on hand." /underlining added/

The NIE thus suggests the danger of a psychological unravelling of the RVNAF--the possibility that its will to fight might significantly decline.

But, in the light of subsequent events, the NIE's appraisal of the capabilities of the RVNAF appears to have overlooked its vulnerability to a command and control breakdown and to have underemphasized the possibility of a breakdown of its will to fight in the face of strong pressure. The NIE also failed to foresee the envelopment of the retreating fighting units in a vast tide of refugees and military dependents. Still, since the Estimate

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

was highly qualified, and since it did not and, we think, could not foresee Thieu's hasty and unplanned withdrawals, these failures were certainly not complete ones. And the likely performance under stress of many of the South Vietnamese units which performed so badly after Thieu's decision to withdraw was to some extent predicted. The question was addressed, for example, in the December 19, 1974 joint CIA/DIA study entitled "Status of the South Vietnamese Combat Forces." It characterized these units in this way:

> "ARVN units in MR 1 are generally in poor condition following the extended period of heavy combat. All three regular ARVN infantry divisions--the 1st, 2d, and 3d--are understrength and most of the regiments are only marginally combat effective." (p. 1) /All three broke without being seriously challenged by the NVA/.
>
> "The 23d division is still at full strength, and is rested and combat effective, but would have difficulty defending Pleiku and reinforcing Kontum with the supporting forces now present in the highlands if heavy Communist attacks broke out." (p. 7) /A combination of the fight for Ban Me Thuot, which involved two new NVA divisions, and the manner in which the withdrawal order was implemented resulted in this division's disintegration/.
>
> "The 22d division...can be expected to continue performing well against Communist forces in Binh Dinh Province." (p. 7) /Apparently it did, until it, too, became aware of the general unravelling which had taken place elsewhere/.

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

Only the analysis of the Marine Division may have been far off the mark:

> "The Marine Division, long considered one of South Vietnam's finest combat units...is rated highly effective and the most combat-ready ARVN unit in MR 1." (p. 3) /While all the events surrounding its withdrawal from northern MR 1 are still unknown, it apparently maintained its unit integrity until it reached Danang. After its arrival there and during the period of the withdrawal of the Marines from Danang, there was an apparent major breakdown in its discipline/.

From all the above, it can be fairly established that the community did not wear rose-colored glasses when looking at the South Vietnamese armed forces. It can also be said, however, that it did not anticipate the degree and extent of the strain those forces would be subjected to by their own Commander-in-Chief. Nevertheless, Thieu's unfortunate behavior was of a character, and his decision was made in such a way, as to virtually preclude our ability to foresee either. His moves were also of a character--e.g., his extraordinary vacillation concerning whether or not Hue would be defended--which adversely affected the ability of his commanders and troops to function.

The increasing remoteness of GVN officials with their US counterparts--well noted during the past year as American resolve vis-a-vis South Vietnam waned--severely hampered US efforts to assess trends in South Vietnamese politics and policies. But, in

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

the last analysis, it was the peculiar inner working of Thieu's mind which was decisive. It was not the plan to withdraw in itself, but, rather, the manner of its implementation, which produced the psychological shock waves.

III. More Recent Estimating

The most recent estimate is SNIE 53/14.3-75: "Assessment of the Situation in South Vietnam," 27 March 1975. Written in the midst of the chaotic situation which obtained to the northern half of South Vietnam, its key judgment was:

> "Communist momentum, however, will be hard to stop, and the North Vietnamese may be tempted to commit the remaining portion of their strategic reserve to exploit the situation. Even if they do so, we believe that the GVN's military strength in the southern part of the country will enable it to survive the current dry season, although additional losses are certain.... Even so, ...the result likely [will] be defeat by early 1976."

Since the SNIE's publication, all of MRs 1 and 2 have been lost. While there has been a momentary pause in the Communist's forward movement, there is no sign that the North Vietnamese offensive has ended. The community's view now is that the SNIE was too sanguine. A new interagency assessment, published on 4 April, concluded that, because of the impact of military reverses and political uncertainty, and because Hanoi will bring yet additional forces into the struggle,"the question over the defeat

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

of the Republic of Vietnam is timing--whether it will collapse or be militarily overwhelmed in a period of weeks or months."

This assessment sees two courses of action open to the Communists:

> "The application of massive force to inflict final defeat... /or/ envelop Saigon, cut off its supplies and thereby bring the Government of Vietnam to its knees."

The interagency assessment concludes that the Communists most likely will pursue the latter course of action:

> "...that Hanoi will opt for a less costly and politically more expedient alternative, calculating that South Vietnamese collapse from within is near at hand."

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1

25X1

Distribution:
1 - DCI
2 - DDCI
3 - ER
4 - PRD Subject
5 - PRD Chron
6 - PRD/OC
7 - IC/Registry
25X1 8 - IC/[redacted]
9 - D/DCI/IC
10 - D/DIA
11 - DDI
12 - D/OCI

25X1

Approved For Release 2004/12/01 : CIA-RDP80M01066A001100080012-1